March 17th, 1862 - a Monday

Three days earlier, Frazer Stearns, the esteemed, 21 year old son of the president of Amherst College was killed at the battle of Newborn, a battle which the North won, but which was very bloody:

The battle had raged for something less than an hour when the 21st lost one of its noblest officers, in the person of Adj. Frazer A. Stearns, the young man who bore himself so bravely in the difficult and dangerous charge on the right of the enemy’s battery on Roanoke Island. Poor Stearns received a bullet in his right breast and fell dead in his place. Lieut. Col. Clark, who is in command of the 21st was affected to tears when relating the circumstances of his untimely death, for he felt almost the love of a father for the young man

(Newspaper Archive).

The death of the young Mr. Stearns greatly affected the Amherst community. Samuel Bowles, from New York, relayed to Sue and Austin, “the news from Newbern took away all the remaining life. I shut & threw away the paper after seeing at first glance the great sad fact to all of us who knew him. I did not care for victories - for anything then” (Lundin 124). It is likely Samuel Bowles was one of the first to receive the ill news, for the above cited report of the battle came from New York: “The following graphic account of the capture of Newbern, N.C. is taken
from the correspondence of the N.Y. Tribune. We are compelled to omit the interesting details of
the declaration and march of our troops, and give only the description of the battle”

(Newspaper Archive).

Emily Dickinson responded to the events, herself, within the week, writing back to
Bowles, “Austin is chilled - by Frazer’s murder - He says - his Brain keeps saying over ‘Frazer
is killed’ - ‘Frazier is killed,’ just as Father told it - to Him.’ Two or three words of lead - that
dropped so deep, they keep weighing -.’ One can infer from Dickinson’s correspondence that she
received the information secondhand, aurally only perhaps. It is clear Dickinson, herself, was
affected by the events, for she goes on to express admiration for the young Stearns which is
indicative of an archetypal allure he engendered in her mind (more on this later). It, nonetheless,
bears note that her most early response to Frazer’s death is filtered through the griefs of Austin.
Thusly, Emily Dickinson sets herself at a remove from this grave reality, suggestive of a
sensitivity so teetering toward despair that she needs must set herself some barrier to the events.
In this sense, her further letters, and the poetry which Frazer Stearn’s death obliquely inspired,
act simulacra for a mise-en-scene which includes: deaths at war, personal worries and hopes, and
interpersonal regards. Should the curious reader find herself a logic with the representation of
these events as represented by Dickinson vis a vis the erection of a frame constructed to her tonal
specifications, then one might glean a subjective through line as relates the war indicative of
Dickinson’s personal views. A question, then, is to what aesthetic system does Dickinson
subscribe, if to any at all? Or, to what metafictional conceit, should one be present at all, does the
wartime production of Emily Dickinson serve? Perhaps, in response to a surfeit of intellectual
and emotional turmoil, Dickinson sought to mine ever deeper into her own, subjective truth,
insofar as the proximity of war rhetoric in March 1862, as in the months preceding and following
for some time, was so great.

The month of March 1862, does bear greater inquiry. An article in Harper’s Weekly,
printed March 15, 1862, declared, “Tennessee Returning to the Union.” While in the following
years Tennessee remained one of the most divided, most geographically contested states in the
war, Nashville was the first Confederate capital of state to fall into Union hands. Other events include:

Abraham Lincoln appointing Andrew Johnson to be military governor of Tennessee; Battle of Pea Ridge; Battle of Elkhorn Tavern; a proposal from Lincoln for slaves in border states to be gradually emancipated with compensation to owners, indicative of the prevalence of concession as a mot clé of wartime discourse; Battle of New Bern, March 14; Ulysses S. Grant commands forces at Pittsburg Landing; Ford’s Theater in Washington D.C. reopens on March 19th, after expensive renovations; Battle of Kernstown, March 23, a Union victory fraught with strategic loopholes later exploited by Confederate forces.

Should you but fail at - Sea -
In sight of me -
Or doomed lie -
Next Sun - to die -
or rap - at Paradise - unheard -
I’d harass God -
Until He let you in!

(Franklin 275)

The above poem, written by Emily Dickinson in 1862, does bear mark of wartime commentary and particularly of that death which disturbs a heretofore seamless binary, that of father and son. The second person address of the first line, “Should you but fail,” proposes a discourse between this other, and the “sight of me,” who may well be a projection of Dickinson by Dickinson who has formed in order to offer sympathy for someone set toward a futile task. Rather than follow the trend of the wartime matron set for an overwrought welcome to a concocted Eden of hospitality, Dickinson bases her admiration for the men of war on a discourse between herself and an oppressive other: “I’d harass God - Until He let you in!” This not only implies Dickinson’s lifetime struggle with religion, but underscores her unfettered opinion as
concerns justice: in the theater of war, right and wrong ought their proper consequence she seems to say.

Specific reference to Frazer Stearns might arise here: “Next Sun - to die - / or rap - at Paradise - unheard -.” A reactionary reading suggests Dickinson’s growing resentment with the numbing effects of war, one of which proposes the habituation of the sensory self to the graven consequences of the war. Dickinson, here, argues not only for the non-erasure of memory, no matter its pain, but for her preference for justice which considers an individual’s own valors. She wrote of Stearns with the compensatory fervor of a new lover in late March 1862.

Dear Children,

You have done more for me - 'tis least that I can do, to tell you of brave Frazer - "killed at Newbern," darlings. His big heart shot away by a "minie ball."

I had read of those - I didn't think that Frazer would carry one to Eden with him. Just as he fell, in his soldier's cap, with his sword at his side, Frazer rode through Amherst. Classmates to the right of him, and classmates to the left of him, to guard his narrow face! He fell by the side of Professor Clark, his superior officer - lived ten minutes in a soldier's arms, asked twice for water - murmured just, "My God!" and passed! Sanderson, his classmate, made a box of boards in the night, but the brave boy in, covered with a blanket, rowed six miles to reach the boat, - so poor Frazer came. They tell that Colonel Clark cried like a little child when he missed his pet, and could hardly assume his post.

The bed on which he came was enclosed in a large casket shut entirely, and covered him from head to foot with the sweetest flowers. He went to sleep from the village church. Crowds came to tell him goodnight, choirs sang to him, pastors told how brave
he was - early-soldier heart. And the family bowed their heads, as the reeds of the wind shakes.

So our part in Frazer is done, but you must come next summer, and we will mind ourselves of this young crusader- too brave that he could fear to die. We will play his tunes - maybe he can hear them; we will try to comfort his broken-hearted Ella, who, as the clergyman said, "gave him peculiar confidence." . . . Austin is stunned completely. Let us love better, child, it's most that's left to do

(Armand 106).

The religious allusions of this letter act scaffolding for the larger conversation posited that concerns a justice which would see such valorous youth as Stearns destroyed by canons at war. A result of this ‘scaffolding’ is that Dickinson’s profoundest questions can translate to an audience who is mostly concerned with, eventually, surmounting their sadness come the bereavement. Dickinson’s letters are, thus, much like her poems, in that they also contain messages hidden, and they also concern contemporary events in a manner which underscores their inherent timelessness; her letters do differ from her poems in that the audience is explicitly expressed. Further, Dickinson’s use of persona as means of mediation with the audience might be gleaned most clearly from her letters.

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum -
Kept beating - beating - till I thought
My mind was going numb -
And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then -

(Franklin 340)

The above letter, contrasted to this poem from 1862, dealing with themes similar, does expose the performative aspect of Dickinson’s modes of writing. For here, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” the tragedies are subjective, irreconcilable to external conditions which might offer solace upon completion of a formal mourning period. She writes of her struggle to make sense, to then not lapse into that so common numbness, and finally of her moment of reason, albeit constituent to a foreign, entirely subjective logic. Thus, in line with the thought of a certain Paul Crumbley, author of an essay about Dickinson called “The Politics of Gift-Based Circulation,” one might consent that, indeed, “writing is important primarily as a gift that expresses depth of feeling and confirms shared values rather than as a means of communicating news” (Eberwein, MacKenzie 40). Is even the above noted letter less a news item than a mode of interpersonal parlay? It’s topic is grave, and the facts are not then changeable, and so it does seem that, in the thematic repetition, Dickinson strives to communicate something unnamed. “How vain it seems
to write, when one knows how to feel,” Emily wrote to Sue Dickinson in February 1852 (Eberwein, MacKenzie 40). The grouping of vanity with writing does underscore a reading of Dickinson’s writing as performative, and, further, that it had been so for a long time.

March 18th, Tuesday, 1862

The noble toned address of General McClellan meets with a hearty response from the troops; it will speak for itself to a patriotic and candid people; but whatever this glorious soldier now does, will be carped at and perverted by the friends of that malignant set of Congressional fanatics who - so it is recorded in a Republican Journal, the New York Times - talked of censuring him for beating the rebels at Manassas without firing a gun! Let whoever cannot respond to the sentiment of this address, suspect his fitness to feel aright for his country. He is partisan-bound or else sold to the Northern enemies of our country: we mean to be precise - sold to the set who Postmaster General Blair classes as aiders and abetters of secession and who would prolong our war eternally” (Newspaper Archive).

The above news report, a discussion of the Union leader of great esteem, General McClellan, presents oblique discourse on the topic of silence and loquacity: “will speak for itself,” a common phrase, used above, implies the General’s merits needing little verbal prodding. Emily Dickinson expresses similar discourse in a letter dated most probably to 1862:

… Uncle [Loring Norcross] tolus us you were too busy. Fold your little hands - the heart is the only workman we cannot excuse.

… Gratitude is not the mention of a tenderness, but its mute appreciation, deeper than we reach — all our Lord demands, who sizes better knows than we. Willing unto death, if only we perceive He die (Ward 274).
I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it’s true —
Men do not sham Convulsion,
Nor simulate, a Throe -

The eyes glaze once - and that is Death -
Impossible to feign
The Beads upon the Forehead
By homely Anguish strung

(Franklin 339)

Honesty seems, above all, to be the theme here. A discourse between body and mind is also contained here. She lauds what cannot be shammed, “Convulsion,” but it is a laudation rooted in tragedy: “The eyes glaze once - and that is Death -.” The laudation, thus, bears relation again to her dual minds vis a vis warranted death against unwarranted, unfair deaths: “… I didn’t think Frazer would carry one [a mortal wound inflicted by a canon] to Eden with him” (Armand). While a death, “impossible to feign,” might suggest an honesty, insofar as it fulfills the characteristics of a self-contained worth, neither Dickinson’s poetry or prose takes a completely firm stance as regards the worth of such honesty. Still, brief discussion of Dickinson’s relation to the referent contained by honesty can reveal more about her relation to herself as a self unexpressed as compared to a self expressed. What is the level of honesty inherent to her wartime poetry and letters? Is it likely that a performative writing occurred in order to preserve a more sacred self, or, perhaps, to playfully obscure an alterity?

March 19th, Wednesday, 1862

Saying nothing of this war, to maintain our position as a first class power, or to adequately protect our commerce upon the seas, or our harbors and cities in
case of a European war, we must throw aside our wooden hulks, and adopt the scientific progress of the age in mailing our vessels of war.

(Newspaper Archive).

The above excerpt concerns the technological empowerment, or lack thereof, of the United States in reference to a statement made in the House of Commons by Lord Palmerston which claimed France to be constructing many iron, rather than wooden, ships.

Heretofore, there has been little discussion of Emily Dickinson as regards her relationship to Europe, or, perhaps relatedly, technology. The overseas component of Dickinson’s Amherst life can be gleaned from the following poem:

From Blank to Blank -
A Threadless Way
I pushed Mechanic feet -
To stop - or perish - or advance -
Alike indifferent -

If end I gained
It ends beyond
Indefinite disclosed -
I shut my eyes - and groped as well
’Twas lighter - to be Blind -

(Franklin 484)

The burgeoning industry of the age, as well as the war, and the quibbles with Europe, and the globalizing nature of the time, may, indeed, have proved a lot to contend with should one have wished their guise of calm to only reflect a calm inner state, rather than concealing a desolate and forsaken state of internal affairs. The poem asserts the superiority of such a unity at
its ending: “’Twas lighter - to be Blind —.” The preceding lines deal with dislocation and the realization on the part of the speaker that even if something was gained, its “ends beyond” only teased the seeker. Then, the poem might be a commentary on the futility of linear progression, or, perhaps, more generally, a lament for the binary nature of the war: win or lose, such “Mechanic feet” in progression can only obscure what truth there may once have been. Truth, here, is not named, but it is hinted at, and it seems, if anything, quite a subjective affair.

March 20th, Thursday, 1862

General Landor died at paw Paw, Western Virginia, on Sunday afternoon, the 9th inst., from the effects of the wound received at Ball’s BLuff. He had a presentiment from the first that he should fall during the war, and before he took command of the brigade gave directions to his wife respecting his place of burial

(NewsPaper Archive).

The above article underscores the atmosphere of acceptance which had overcome many people. Similar to this ‘atmosphere,’ is numbness, accepting death and speaking of one’s own end in cordial terms before it occurs.

I run it over — “Dead,” Brain, “Dead.”
Put it in Latin - left of my School —
Seems it don’t shriek so - under rule.

Turn it, a little — full in the face
A trouble looks bitterness —
Shift it — just —
Say “When Tomorrow comes this way —
I shall have waded down one Day."

I suppose it will interrupt me some
Till I get accustomed — but then the Tomb
Like other new Things — shows largest — then
And smaller, by Habit

It’s shrewder then
[to] Put the Thought in advance — a Year —
How like “a fit” — then —
Murder — wear!

(Phillips 51)

Like the aforementioned solider cognizant of his coming demise, Dickinson writes about looking death, this mystery spectre, “full in the face.” But then she concedes that death, to wit, is no unfeeling concept, because its revelations get “smaller, by Habit.” Thus, one might try to outwit death, “It’s shrewder then,” so that by comprehending a demise a year ahead of time, “How like “a fit” — then — / Murder wear!”

March 21st, Friday, 1862

Amos Kendall, an American of Letters, wrote that “the cause and causes of this rebellion may be summed up in the single phrase, *Pride of Wealth and Lust of Power*”

(Newsletter Archive).

Commentary concerning the glory of artifice appears in a letter from Emily Dickinson to Samuel Bowles written in late November 1862.
Perhaps you tire - now - A small weight - is obnoxious - upon a weary Rope - but had you Exile - or Eclipse - or so huge a Danger, as would dissolve all other friends - ‘twould please me to remain - Let others - show this Surry’s Grace — Myself - assist his Cross.

(Johnson 180).

If one assigns stability to a rope, and if one assigns quality to stability, then it is hard to read the words concerning the obnoxiousness of “A small weight” without reference to an imbalance wrought by way of superfluous superficialities added upon a thesis lacking in reason. Like her suggestion of blindness to abet comfort amidst myriad external complications rendered upon an unthinking, linear progress, she writes “‘twould please me to remain.”’ While Dickinson’s simulacra self might have journeyed widely, here is an example of an ongoing desire to simply remain. An obvious argument for such a method is the fact that Dickinson did, in fact, spend much time at home.

**March 22nd, Saturday, 1862**

Governor Johnson at Nashville spoke that he comes

To aid you in the upholding and defending of this, the best Government that God ever spoke into existence. I have never deserted that Government. How could I? The exile - my wife driven hither and thither, her servants stolen, my house a rebel hospital - how could i desert the glorious Government under which I had been so richly and abundantly blessed, and under which so many of my fellow beings have enjoyed and do enjoy so bountifully the boon of liberty and security?

(Newspaper Archive)
Dickinson was also concerned with notions of tradition and their counterpart, her poetic aesthetics changing markedly through the years, not least through those years of the Civil War. Insofar as her poetics owed more to tradition or sui-generis auteurship - and it is likely a balance of the two, for she was well read historically and temporally immediately, though, it must be noted, as did Higginson, that her’s was a genius irrespective of cultural moments which, one might wager to say, was a fact recognized by herself which led to her isolation, and her lack of a degree of publishing proportionate to the quantity of her work -, Dickinson’s concerns regarding this duality were imposed upon externalities.

Indeed, Dickinson occupied a self-consciously queered distance from either neglecting heritage or running away from it entirely. When Higginson, who was, according to Sewall, “the one she talked to most about books,” asked for her favorite poets, Dickinson did not name the pompous Young or the naughty, anguished Byron or even the most highly regarded of them all, Shakespeare. She said: “For Poets - I have Keats - and Mr. and Mrs. Browning” (Phillips).

March 23rd, Sunday, 1862 - End of the Week

The Battle of Kernstown began the “Stonewall” campaign. Emily Dickinson wrote a letter suggestive of this pivotal war moment insofar as decisive war maneuvers might contrast with Dickinson’s own consternation regarding her inability to locate herself starkly amidst the myriad forces at work in her life, and upon it. Writing to Higginson, she says,

Dear friend —
Are these more orderly? I thank you for the Truth —
I had no Monarch in my life, and cannot rule myself, and when I try to organize - my little Force explodes - and leaves me bare and charred —
I think you called me “Wayward.” Will you help me improve?

(Johnson 178).
Let the reader note, Dickinson was no stranger to treating her interactions with Higginson as performance, indeed, initially in order to persuade him of her well-tempered poetics. Ironically, the notion of a Monarch present does imply performance, insofar as a subject must act to please the Monarch. Thus, in only imagining this concept, Dickinson sets the Monarch’s reign on the same inner plane which spawns her poetics, insofar as this passes for description of her imagination and its myriad entanglements.

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld —
The Lady dare not lift her Vail
For fear it be dispelled —

But peers beyond her mesh —
And wishes - and denies -
Lest Interview - annul a want
That Image - satisfies -

(Franklin 430)

The above poem describes a purity which excess might ruin. Ironically, this purity may be “That Image.”

Reflection

This was a satisfying project, which allowed me to found my interpretations upon more than personal or scholarly tergiversation, which, in the absence of concrete historicization, can oft engender yet more obscurity. I was quite taken by Frazer Stearn’s oblique, yet strong, presence in Dickinson’s life. It seems his death marked her stronger involvement in the war, through her poetry and her engagements from letters. My biggest frustration was the difficulty in finding articles which dealt with a specific day in a specific city. Generally, it was the larger
newspapers which provided my editorial content. I certainly felt that my contextual reading informed all my readings of the poems. It is curious to think how greatly a reading can differ given one’s present circumstances compounded by past circumstances.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


